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ABSTRACT

This paper examines problems in U.S. English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs, focusing on the stories of three Chinese ESL learners from immigrant families. All three of these people had been long-term ESL students in New York City (they had been enrolled in ESL programs for 4-8 years but had not mastered the cognitive and academic skills in English needed to compete at grade level). In describing their ESL programs, the students reported such things as never having had any textbooks in their ESL classes, seldom being given any homework, never receiving help for math or other subjects, and not learning anything. One student had a good first-year ESL teacher who helped students with math and science and taught them English. However, she never tested out of the ESL classes and reported that the ESL class was called a "class for the retarded." The paper concludes that much of ESL education fails because the programs hold no standards or clearly defined expectations for their learners and because the urgent needs of ESL students are not well understood or adequately addressed. It also fails because many ESL classes are conducted by poorly trained teachers. (SM)

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What is wrong with ESL programs in schools?

Deqi Zen

Southeast Missouri State University

(Paper presented at the Mid-TESOL annual conference, 2001)

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As a nonnative English speaker myself, I had, until a few years ago, always thought what a blessing it was for nonnative-English speaking children in the United States to have an ESL program in schools to help them learn the English language and assist them in their academic subjects, which would guarantee them an equal opportunity for education and promise them a bright future. With the assistance and support from an ESL program plus the target language environment and the advantage of being young, ESL learners, I assumed, would be able to develop their language skills and gradually catch up with their native-English speaking peers in a few years. My assumption was not without any ground.

During the years of my graduate study at Ohio University, I observed the transition and progression of a few Chinese children, whose parents had brought them to the States in their early or upper elementary school years. Although all of them had a difficult beginning, most of them came out well in a couple of years or a little more and could speak English so well that it often amazed and humbled many of us, master and doctoral candidates, who had studied English for years and somehow could never get rid of their accent and achieve native-like fluency. Fonda, for instance, was 11 years old when she began her American school experience. Like many other kids, her first few months in school were full of tears because she could not understand the teacher and was not able to write a report of a book she could not even read. Not a genius, Fonda, however, emerged from her initial difficulties in about just three years' time a straight A

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student (she remained so all her junior high school years), a cheer leader and a popular member of the school theatre group. She was admitted to a boarding high school for academically outstanding students when the family moved to North Carolina. From there she graduated with honor and then went to a prestigious university with a big scholarship. This is by no means the only successful story I know. But Fonda helped to create the image I had of ESL programs in those years.

It was not until the mid 1990s when I began to teach ESL in a language institute in New York City that I had the opportunity to meet more immigrant families of different backgrounds, to have more direct contact with ESL learners and their parents, and to learn more about their stories of survival in this new country. It was then that my rosy image of ESL programs began to fade. The stories of Tony, Julie and John, to name just a few, who had stayed in ESL programs for years and years but failed to master the basic skills of reading and writing, shocked and saddened me first and then forced into my mind the question again and again: what is wrong with ESL programs in schools?

The Stories of Tony, Julie and John

I met Tony, a Chinese boy, in one of my evening adult ESL classes, a lower intermediate class. When Tony showed up in the class the first time, I thought he was a child of one of the students. But when he came to the class the second time, I had to check with him and found he was a student in a nearby after-school tutoring class (many language schools for adults in New York City also offer various after-school classes for school-age ESL learners). Even though I would like to keep him in my class for he was obviously the best in responding to my questions and actually helped other older learners

in the class with their pronunciation, I thought my class did not fit him and he should go back where he belonged. However, when the boy insisted, I agreed to let him stay on the condition that he would do additional reading and writing exercises. It was then that I found that, with a shock, the boy could barely read and write in English. Further inquiry troubled me even more. Tony was actually 14 years old and in the 7th grade, not 12 and not in the 5th grade as he had told me. He had been in an ESL class since his third grade. Tony was a perfectly healthy and normal boy. I could not understand what had happened to him all those years in school.

Then I met Julie, a very polite young lady. I was also teaching Chinese in a weekend Chinese school in lower Manhattan. The class met every Saturday and the school had its own curriculum and textbooks. Most of the students were ABC (American Born Chinese). I taught the 6th grade. The majority of students in my class were in the 7th grade or above in their regular school. It was another unforgettable experience in my career as a language teacher. It was not an easy job to motivate those young people to learn their mother's tongue. Julie was one of the few who was willing to learn and always did her homework. I had never questioned my students' English skills. Since they were born and had their schooling in the States, I assumed that English should not be a problem and, as a matter of fact, they spoke English better than I did in terms of pronunciation. It was not until the end of the semester that I realized, sadly, how wrong I was. As part of their final exam, the students were given a Chinese passage to translate into English. The passage was short and easy. While most of the students seemed to have no problem understanding its meaning, their English translation was miserable and full of grammatical errors, which revealed a lack of the mastery of written English expected of

their grade level. Julie was one of those who did poorly in the translation part. The fact that she was in the 11th grade and would soon finish her high school made the whole situation even worse for her. Further inquiry revealed that Julie was not an ABC but came to the States when she was in the third grade, young enough, as most researchers would agree, to acquire a native-like proficiency in a second language. However, she had not yet obtained the basic skills. She admitted that she had stayed in an ESL program for "a long time" and got out of it just two years before.

John's story was a heart-broken one. I met John's father at a subway station. I was busy grading students' homework while waiting for the train. He approached me and began to speak to me. Barely knowing anything about me, the man asked me whether I could tutor his son. The man was obviously in despair because the school had told him that his son was not able to graduate from high school. John was 11 when he came to New York to join his parents. An above-average student in China, according to the father, the boy had been struggling with English ever since he started his school in the States. The parents, busy working to survive, could not help him, nor were they able to. Starting from the third year, the boy was placed in a special ed. class and labeled with "learning disabilities." Even though the parents had doubts, the school convinced them that the special ed. class was better for their son and they believed it. When the boy came to junior high after staying in the special ed. class for two years, he had become truly "disabled" because he had not learned the subjects required for his grade, nor had he made much progress in English. The emotional damage was even more severe. Seeing no good in himself, the boy became increasingly isolated from his peers and even from his parents. "My son is finished," the man said with tears in his eyes and anguish on his face.

A failure that can hardly be justified

These are true stories and are by no means exceptions. During my two years' stay in New York City, I met many Tonys, Julies and Johns. A recent study (Newell and Smith, 1999) revealed that Long Term ESL (LTL) students in New York City, defined as those who "have been enrolled in ESL program for 4 to 8 years, but have not yet mastered the cognitive and academic skills in English needed to complete at grade level"(p. 1), was nearly 7 percent of the total children enrolled in public schools, not including those drop-outs and those who moved out of the city. In the year of 1995 to 1996, according to Newell and Smith's study, students who had been in ESL instruction for seven or more years and yet still lacked the literacy skills necessary to compete at grade level was 6.4%. The number could be much larger if we take into consideration those students such as Julie, who exited from the ESL program but acquired only minimal reading and writing skills. I do not have the statistic figures for Tony and Julie's academic performances; however, one can reasonably assume that, without a solid mastery of skills in reading and writing, these students stand little chance to survive in their educational career. I later learned that Tony did not want to go to that class he belonged to because he could not do any of his homework.

ESL researchers and educators today generally believe, largely due to the work by Cummins (1984), Collier (1989) and their colleagues, that immigrant students need an average of five to seven years to acquire what Cummins called "Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency " to compete with their native speaking peers. Some believe it may take even longer. While this is probably true if we understand language learning as a

lifelong enterprise even for a native speaker, the fact that a significant number of students who have spent years in ESL programs but have not yet been able to go beyond or even to obtain minimal literacy skills is, however, something that can hardly be accepted but a failure of ESL education. Whenever I think of Tony, Julie, and John, my heart sinks: what will be their future? And we have to ask the question: what is going on in the ESL program in school?

There is certainly no simple answer to this question. The variables, cited in Newell and Smith's report, identified as related to the poor outcome, such as "access to pre-school experience," "late entry into school," "mobility," or factors such as "large class size" and "little individual attention during their early childhood" may explain part of the story. These variables or factors, however, can hardly justify the failure, nor do they help answer the question: what happened in those hundreds and hundreds of hours the learners spent in ESL classes? Even if pre-school experience or first language literacy does affect a child's cognitive and language development at the beginning, a 7 year old, a 10 year old, even a 13 or 14 year old still has time to catch up and to develop literacy in the second language and to study school subjects.

What did those ESL learners say about their ESL experience?

The question concerning the failure of many ESL programs can probably be answered at least partially by those learners, and we indeed have to listen to what they say about their ESL experiences. Tony was very reluctant to talk about his ESL classes. The boy had enough sense to know it was a shame for him to stay in an ESL program for years and still did not know how to read and write properly. But finally he was able to describe to

me the ESL classes he had attended, which were by no means what I had pictured in my mind for years: intensive English instruction and academic assistance. It astounded me to learn he had never had any textbooks in his ESL classes and were seldom given any homework. "What do you do in class?" The boy answered, "Not much. She gives us exercises before the test. Nobody can do it because she didn't teach us." When asked whether he had ever got any help for his math and other subjects, the boy answered: "Never." "Then how did you manage to do your homework?" I got no answer.

Julie gave a similar story and regretted that she did not understand the importance of English in her early years:

> My parents were always busy and they don't speak English. I could not do my homework. The teachers didn't care if I did or not. I didn't care, either. Nobody cared. When I realized that I needed to learn English well, it was too late.

These stories about their ESL experience are by no means exceptional. Angela, now a high school senior, recalled her ESL experience in her 8th and 9th grades (she came to the United States when she was in the 7th grade) and commented that,

> It was totally a waste of time. We didn't learn anything. The teacher would give us paper and pencils and asked us to draw a nose, a face and then color them. It is ridiculous. Everyone hated the class. We were not 2 or 3 years old. We need to learn English and do our homework.

Angela, however, was very grateful to her first ESL teacher (in 7th grade), who was bilingual in English and Chinese. She said her first year ESL classes helped her a great deal because the teacher helped them with math, science, and taught them English. Angela was able to attend all the regular subject classes a year later except English language arts. She was lucky because her parents could also provide her with additional

help with her homework. Angela remained in ESL classes two hours a day for two more years because she did not test out. "Do you know what we call an ESL class?" She asked me and then answered herself, "We call it CLASS FOR RETARDED." Angela still has difficulty in writing English essays though she is a top student in math and sciences. She was never taught how to write an essay in English in all her ESL classes.

What was wrong with the ESL program in school?

The stories of those students tell a lot of truth. Much of ESL education has failed because in many cases ESL programs hold no standards or clearly defined expectations for their learners. It fails because the urgent needs of ESL learners are not well understood and adequately addressed. It fails also because many ESL classes are conducted by poorly trained teachers. Another recent report from New York City (Advocates for Children of New York, Inc, LIC, 2001) admits that

> The reality is that the basic educational needs of ELLs have been overlooked for decades and as a result they are seriously underserved in New York schools (p. 4).

Among the key issues identified as related to the poor outcome of ESL education were poor quality of teachers, lack of service, and particularly lack of well-established curriculum and assessment system. According to the report,

> Few schools use textbooks for ESL classes and ESL teachers are given no guidelines about what skills they should be teaching at a particular grade or English proficiency level. Teachers put together their own curriculum using whatever materials are available to them… no required coordination among ESL teachers (p. 32).

I once tutored a 10-year-old girl, a friend's daughter, in her first year in an American school when I was in New York City. This opportunity allowed me some direct observation on ESL education in school. In her first semester, Melody brought home five pages of handouts, including lists of words of school items, sentences explaining American holidays, and basic information questions used in daily life. While Melody certainly needed to learn such words and sentences, those were, however, all she got from her ESL class for a whole semester. The girl spent 3 hours a day, 5 days a week and a total of 4 months in school and never got any help she needed for her math and other subjects either from her ESL teacher or subject teachers. As a matter of fact, she was "pulled out" when the other students were studying their math and other subjects. Melody would very likely become another Tony, Julie, or even John because her parents neither spoke English nor had any subject knowledge taught in school. I worked with Melody 2 or 3 times per week (approximately 4-5 hours) for two semesters. We did not draw or color pictures. We worked on her math, science, and all the other subjects. We visited the local library every week, where Melody picked up the books she wanted to read. Melody was placed in an advanced math class in her second semester and exited from ESL program one and a half years later. She received a "Special Academic Achievement" award when she graduated from the elementary school. Melody is now doing very well in school. Though she still has a long way to go, she has got her feet firmly on the ground and, more importantly, the confidence in working for her future.

An ESL program without a clear standard, a standard-based curriculum, and an effective assessment system, an ESL program that does not hold high expectations for

ESL learners and does not address their needs adequately, is doomed to fail. Instead of fulfilling its promise to provide equal access to educational opportunities, it actually does a disservice to its learners. The present standard-based reform in ESL education will hopefully bring a brighter future for ESL learners. Successful stories of those ESL learners who have succeeded in their educational career suggest that ESL education hold great potentials in assisting its learners. It appears that the process of acquiring the so-called Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency can be accelerated if the needs of ESL learners are well understood and timely, appropriate and high quality assistance is provided. As ESL teachers, we have a great responsibility. In a sense, we hold the future of those children in our hands. We can bring them a bright future if we hold high expectations for them, teach them the right things and in the right way, and care for them as we care for our own children.

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